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# CliffDwellers: A Study in Wildness

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## CLIFFDWELLERS: A STUDY IN WILDNESS

Stoney L. Sasser

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How do I find wildness? This question is a central tenant of my work and manifests psychologically and physically in my installation, video and performance work. As the diversity of non-human ecosystems wanes and wildness along with it, I am overwhelmed by idea that the human generated debris might eventually cover the earth and become our new landscape, our new wilderness. I wonder "what do we do with all of this stuff? In my installations, I play with the materials I gather and accumulate. I construct 'ecosystems' often using pedestrian materials such as nylons, fabric, lint and glitter to explore the object's potential to become something that seems part of the sky, land or sea. I employ elements of surrealism and seek to transform objects in a playful way with the intention of opening up a network of associations located in the work.

CLIFFDWELLERS: A STUDY IN WILDNESS

STONEY L. SASSER

A Supportive Statement Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

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CLIFFDWELLERS: A STUDY IN WILDNESS

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I wish to thank the building service workers for cleaning the floors with a cleaning solution that glows in the dark and made the floor look like clouds or part of the ocean; your work received countless compliments. Thank you to all of the children whose eyes light up when looking at my work, for crouching and pointing and giggling at what they see, your feedback has been wonderful. Thank you to my parents who love and support my oddness and wildness and have always encouraged me to pursue my intuition and stay true to all aspects of myself. Thank you to my committee, for working with me for all of these years, for taking time out of their days, without pay, to support me, push me and help me develop my current art practice. Thank you to the Meals on Wheels girls, for your friendship, laughter, ridiculous t-shirt slogans and nourishing meals that have ensured that I eat over the last few years. Thank you to my cat for her patience these last few years, waiting silently until I had time to come home and feed her. Thank you to the entire faculty at Illinois State University who has generously donated their time and thoughts towards my graduate work. Thank you to ISU to providing me the opportunity to spend three years invested in risk-taking, exploration and intensive studio practice, it is precious to me. Thank you Stoney for keeping it together, making tough decisions, working hard, and remembering to laugh, may you keep on keeping on.

S.L.S.

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## SECTION I

### INTRODUCTION

I intend for this supportive statement to address the conceptual framework in which I situate my work and to provide supporting examples of how my work functions within this conversation. I will use my thesis exhibition *CliffDwellers*, to discuss the pursuit of wildness as a central tenet of my work. These words are meant to clarify frameworks of thinking that map onto my studio practice and the art that comes from it.

Although the function of my art is to be foremost an embodied engagement with the senses, it also situates itself within a conversation on larger topics, particularly within the fields of ecology, and capitalism.

I will begin by exploring properties of wildness pertinent to my work. I will look at wildness in regards to identity, wilderness, and their antithesis: domestication. Following, I will review transformation and impermanence as ideas that situate wildness in my work, I will finish the paper with an overview of my position on ecological devastation, and propose a function of my work in response to these concerns.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although not within the scope of this paper, arguments could be made around entropy, affectivity, ecofeminism and 1960's psychedelia. All of which are pertinent and relevant to the work I make and the conceptual framework around it.

## SECTION II

### THE PURSUIT OF WILDNESS

How do I find wildness? What are the qualities of that which is wild, both in myself and in the world around me? If fascination, exuberance and delight are reactions to wildness, how do I elicit those sensations in the 'viewer'? These are a few of the questions I attempt to address in my work. I will break down the qualities of wildness as they relate to human culture and selfhood, and then I will address wildness in the context of my art. I will finish the paper with an argument for the preservation of wildness in the greater biosphere and how it ties to our own quest for wildness.

Wildness belongs to mystery, zeal and delight. It is autonomous, vital and creative, and is found in both humans and in the greater wilderness.<sup>2</sup> Wildness is innate in humans, and reveals itself in youth as babes growl, wiggle, and gesture exuberantly. Wildness is a state before *discovery* and *knowing*, before acculturation informs decision-making and domesticates actions. Wildness is intuitive, impulsive and connects us to our inherent mystery and the mystery of the life forms we are connected to.

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher Lindquist, "Wild Practices: Teaching the Value of Wildness" (Masters diss., University of North Texas, 2004).

Across cultures, wildness is promoted in a range of socially sanctioned cultural practices. It manifests in the arts, parades, festivals and other forms of self-expression that celebrates the bizarre and ebullient. From *Carnival* in Rio de Janeiro to Mardi Gras in New Orleans, from Drag shows to the Barranquilla Carnival of Colombia, cultures create structured events to offer opportunities for individual and groups to express wildness. These events exude vivacity and joy. They are pinnacles of energy where peoples from a range of backgrounds, identities and races come together to celebrate and delight in an event rooted in the expression of cultural and historical sources of creativity and expression.

### **Feral Self**

I have long been influenced by my experiences as a child traveling in Europe, where, in large urban centers, street performers dressed in dynamic costumes and body paint would, among many types of performances, juggle, blow fire, and walk on stilts. They activated the space in a way that the consumers milling about them couldn't. Or at least didn't.

The pursuit of wildness helps keep me feral. Although I am domesticated in many ways (I abide by laws, live within sanctioned living quarters, and upkeep regular hygiene rituals), I am also a six-eyed creature; I have twenty legs, two heads and ten hearts that undulate. I am born from the odd, the ugly and the blindingly beautiful. I am a creature of paradox, of mystery and creativity and access these qualities through dreams and contemplation. The bizarre and strange properties of myself are as important to me as the 'proper' domestic qualities that have been refined and polished over the years.

As wildness is weeded from the psyche individuals are taught to restrain our impulses and to meld our identity with that which is deemed culturally 'acceptable'. Domestication is a motivating force that attempts to lock down security and assuredness of our futures. At the base of this impulse seems a desire to control the unknown and the unpredictable. The desire to control manifests both within the human psyche and the physical world that we inhabit; a home must be maintained, a lawn cut, infestations eradicated and predators regulated and managed.

Understandably the human is prone to desire comfort, security and predictability. After all, these qualities help to ensure the survival of at least the physical body and subsequent offspring. However, I would suggest that similar to animals confined within zoos (and territories that are too small), the inability to have access to the experience or expression of wildness leads to apathy, depression and stagnation within the spirit.

My art practice and the pursuit of wildness is an attempt to shake the grip of domestication and activate the creative mind by sourcing elements of wildness (the tactics of which I will address later). I see my practice as an antidote to many maladies symptomatic of contemporary civilization (such as depression, complacency and anxiety). Exposure to wildness alleviates these symptoms of inertia through movement. Wildness is *active*. It is an agent of change, and is often dynamic and unpredictable. I think that exposure to wildness rustles the impulses of a youthful self, if only for a moment, while viewers are engaged in experience.

The attempt to work against the path of least resistance present in domestication requires relentless attention. I attempt to live, think and make actively, impulsively and

joyfully, evoking the wild within. As a result, my imagination and resulting work wrestles against the constriction of complacency and invokes a call for a zestful, active experience.

I am restless in my search for new problems to solve. I am at my best when operating from a place I feel uncomfortable and the unknown is staring back at me. With wildness beckoning, my studio practice is the frontier for play and intuitive negotiation.

My studio practice goes something like this:

Step one: Make some extravagant plan that is unrealistic and just past my reach. Step two: Begin to work towards that. *Stretch!* Step three: At some point the urge takes over to play dress up, to spontaneously play with materials. *Experiment.* Negotiate the possibilities of transformation in the materials. Make ridiculous things. Step four: Watch what unfolds, and carefully look for something new or interesting that may be happening. Identify the new elements that arise, and fold them into the steadily building lexicon of Stoney's wild things.

My studio is my trailhead for internal wildness. Within the physical space for creating I am not only seeking to arouse surrounding objects from mundane existences, I am seeking this transformation myself.



SECTION III  
CLIFFDWELLERS AS A SITE OF TRANSFORMATION:  
FROM THE MUNDANE TO THE WILD

Alteration, mutation, metamorphosis, transfiguration, and transmutation; the process of transformation takes many forms, sometimes enthralling and other times awkward and grotesque. At the root of transformation is a dramatic change in form or appearance, such as the metamorphosis of a animal over the course of its life cycle. Transformation is alchemical magic and a visual confirmation of the fundamental nature of change at the root of existence.

I seek to transform the original state of objects to generate wildness in otherwise mundane materials. I frequently hybridize forms combining two seemingly disparate elements creating something new. As I manipulate and recombine materials, the perceptions about forms and materials shifts the viewer's experience of the objects that is unpremeditated and nuanced.

Although my work is intuitive, I look to transform materials according to a formal framework consistent with the biological. This might appear to be antithetical to the quest for wildness, but I would argue that wildness exists within the order of the universe. Wildness connects humans to earth others. Wildness is a force. In the material practice of art making I am also looking to form as a means to find connection to wildness. I do this by using devices like repetition and modularity, scale shifts, color, attention to the seam

of meeting parts and choosing materials and experiences that evoke haptic responses in the viewer.

*What pattern connects the crab to the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me? And me to you?* Gregory Bateson, *Of Mind and Nature*

I am interested in the theoretical structure Gregory Bateson uses to locate a link between living entities. In Mind and Nature he writes, “The anatomy of the crab is repetitive and rhythmical. It is, like music, repetitive with modulation.”<sup>3</sup> I use repetition, modulation and rhythm to create forms that refer to biological entities. For example, the toothpicks inserted rhythmically into foam (such as the ones seen in the ‘tide pools’ of *CliffDwellers*) reference sea urchins or stiff hairs on raised hackles. This ‘urchin’ is wild in its transformation from the mundane (toothpicks and foam) to something that seems of life. The ‘urchin’ seems animate by the formal resemblance to other living forms.

On the level of scale, elements of the constructed environments volley between micro and macro conditions and open up a range of possibilities and relationships between the viewer and the conditions of the installation. The work is ripe in subtle details inviting the viewer further into the work at the micro level. Viewers tower over the marshy ‘tide’ pools. Sections of the pools on the floor seem like small islands, and the viewer might feel they are flying over them in with a bird’s eye view. But the larger structures, of both the gallery space and the cave or shell like structures suggest a space

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Mind and nature : A Necessary Unity*. (Cresskill, N.J.: Hampton Press, 2002), 9.

the viewer could inhabit. The bodies of viewers are implicated as both large and small in the context of the space as they negotiate such scale shifts of many varieties.

In *CliffDwellers* color is a driving mechanism to transform and unify space. In the installation, I selected materials and their associate colors that activate under black light. In *CliffDwellers*, there is a special relationship between lighting and color, and this conditional relationship, when activated transforms the space. Before the illusion, under regular light (such as fluorescents), the installation appears to be a mismatch of disjointed materials. However, once activated under the black lights, the entire installation transforms and unifies via light and color. Inert under daylight, the phosphors present in the various materials come ‘alive’ and glow, appearing to be the source of their own light.

Additionally, I seek to unify *CliffDwellers* by focusing on the transition between spaces. Similar to the body and other natural systems, the seams between elements are connected by tissue. The constituent parts of the installations are integrated by material transitions between objects. For example, I use paper cut on the laser printer, tarpaper, and a mesh fabric to move from the floor to other elements of the installation such as the ‘tide pools’ or ‘caves’. The stratum connecting and integrating disparate parts to the whole suggest that all elements are dependent upon and related to the whole. The parts are interconnected and contingent.

The urchin evokes a sense of wildness in its potential for the viewer to animate it as ‘urchin’. This occurs not just as a visual analogy to something living, but also in the haptic sensorial anticipation of prickliness and danger of coming in contact with its spikes. Thus the formal order as elaborated by Bateson references wildness not just in the

organization of the parts but also the qualities or *essence* of the parts. Formal relationships including color, size, and orientation of the parts to whole activate a set of related associations in the viewer.

In addition to the aforementioned formal tactics to transform and unify space, I use another means to further convince, seduce and implicate viewers in the space. The darkness of the space immediately obscures the traditional white walls, the floor and ceiling of the space, creating a chamber like environment. As viewers move into the darkened room, their focal vision has to transfer to peripheral vision. The dilation of the eyes and subsequent dependence on the rods (rather than the cones) of the eyes forces people to experience an alternative awareness and negotiation of space.

As the eyes of the viewer adjust, the participant begins to negotiate and absorb the installation around them. Past the illuminated caves and the fauna-like forms that surround them, a wall contains projections of moving forms. In front of which bubbles rise and billow filling the space with movement. The bubbles catch on the rail above, clotting and eventually falling to the growing mass of bubbles below. A glowing slime begins to puddle as the weight of the mass crushes the bubbles below.

At some point, the viewer becomes aware of a symphony of odd sounds being emitted from various places in the installation. Chirps and utterances seem like they could be recordings from the natural world, but periodically a hoot crops up that is distinctly human. The sounds serve to activate the room and the sensorial engagement of the participants, further inviting them into to illusion.

Lastly a shiny serpentine figure, clearly human, wanders inside and outside of the installation space, further activating the work at a corporeal level and inviting the viewer to extend their contemplation of their bodies as sites of engagement.

## SECTION IV

### INSTALLATION, IMPERMANENCE AND EPHEMERALITY

The nature of installation and site-based work is ephemeral; it is subject to the laws of the universe with change as a constant. In an age of the digital consumption of art images I seek to create experiences that are temporal, immersive and experiential. Rather than using just the eyes, I invite viewers to use their bodies and senses to take in the work. The very experience of the work is one of constant change, where one must maneuver around the installation, and each location bears an alternate perspective.

I am interested in the site of installation as a place of performance – where I as the maker, and you as the viewer are implicated. I construct a stage like setting in which to invite the viewer's imagination and impulses to stir. I am interested in these sites functioning similar to that of the carnival where ““everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.” A carnival operates on the principal of inclusion.”<sup>4</sup>

Additionally, ephemeral work naturally resists capitalist structures and salability. My position on this is kin to many post-minimal artists of the late 60s and 70s. I view this not only as a resistance to the aforementioned patriarchic structures of capitalism and the subsequent damage done to ecological systems but also analogous to the temporality and unfixed nature of the universe.

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<sup>4</sup> David Milman, "The Carnavalesque Practice of Language Writing in the Grotesque Body of I Don't Have Any Paper." *Pivot: Journal Of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2 (2013): 67.

## SECTION V

### SUMMARY ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, MINERAL:

#### JOY, SORROW, AND DESIRE

I am preoccupied with the underlying problems of environmental duress and the uncertain projections for earth and its inhabitants. In the summary of this paper I would like to address my anxiety around the current state of environmental affairs and my own implicit connection to these issues. I will address how it impacts our relationship to wildness and propose a way that my art is a proposal and response to these concerns.

*I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues.*

*I meant no harm.*

*I most truly did not.*

*But I had to grow bigger.*

*So bigger I got.*

Dr. Seuss, The Lorax

Central to human's relationship with, what I will refer to as, the 'bounty of the Earth,' is desire. From precious metals, to a variety of foods (preferably available every season), minerals, and various extractions from animals for clothes and beauty products, fossil fuels, plus many other properties, the earth has seemingly endless resources that humans have gone to great lengths to acquire. This material wealth is seen as available for the consumption, acquisition and ownership of humans. The earth's fruits satisfy the varied faces of desire in humans. Some of this desire is fundamental to existence; hunger,

shelter and clothing are generally agreed to be fundamental properties important to sustaining life. But desire and consumption particularly in the developing world seem superfluous. Desire is based on availability, and the more that is available, the more we want.

As humans gain a certain standard of living, and the ability to manifest and satisfy impulsive or imperative desires, there is a tendency to cultivate what Buddhist texts refer to as *craving*. Craving in Buddhism, is considered a principal component in the root of all suffering. Not only do we make ourselves suffer, we inflict this suffering onto the world around us as we continue our quest to satiate desire.

Capitalism uses desire (in addition to other tactics) as a locus of control. As surveyed countless times, advertising campaigns capitalize on inadequacies and dissatisfactions perceived within the individual which always leaves the consumer wanting more; my hair is too thin, my body too fat, and I must find a product. The product is misguidedly taken to be synonymous with the solution.

But capitalist systems also tap into desire in more subversive, manipulative ways. Most processed foods are engineered to be physiologically addictive using sugars and fats as strategic devices for increased profit margins. Make-up suffocates the skin making it look pallid and frail, leaving the consumer to seek more products as a solution. We exist in a massive wheel of desire, a bottomless pit, and it is ultimately the earth and all her children who pay the price.

Desire is slippery and at the root of a wild mind. It is a motivation that often leads to excess, overconsumption and a tendency to prioritize self over others as an attempt to



satisfy the self. Yet desire is the sense organ that leads us to locate satiety, pleasure, and perhaps even joy. Blind consumption is one thing, but savored pleasure is a worthy goal. Misery exists, and there is a desire to find happiness. Desire meets at the juncture between joy and sorrow, and presses in both directions between them.

I am no onlooker to this paradox. For example, while the abuse and appropriation of ancient and diverse habitats is emotionally devastating to me, I write this essay on a new iMac which consumes precious metals in its making, all of which were extracted from deep within the earth and require the use of toxic chemicals to extract.

Upon thorough self-examination, the bias to my own desire is palpable. Like many of us, I often give preference to my impulses over moral concerns I have for the planet. For example, I need to eat, as all of us living things do. But most commonly I *want* to eat, something *particular*, something *quick*, and often something that is not seasonal or local. Much of this abundant food comes in packaging that pollutes the planet. This same food might have palm oil in it in which they decimate old growth rain forests (and the sentient beings that live there) to plant more trees to extract the palm oil from. Although I am cognizant and concerned for the trajectory of earth and our fellow ‘earth others,’ I am also enmeshed in the very system that conducts such unapologetic violence on the Earth.

One prominent concern for this state of affairs is the eradication of wildness in wilderness areas. Our models for wildness might vanish and what will remain is the shell of representation: a simulacrum.

Lastly, my system of making art is not situated within a pure ideology aligned with these concerns. Although I strive to recycle and reuse materials by giving homes to scraps and debris, I am picky about the qualities of the material, the texture and color of the thing itself. If I need shiny black, I go find shiny black, *often in a store*. I am caught in the paradox of being a concerned citizen and a perpetrator.

Although art is perhaps a flimsy tool in many a political arena, I believe very strongly in art's ability to be used as a tool to, as Johanna Drucker says, 'imagine otherwise'.<sup>5</sup> In a world where consumers are bombarded by the agendas of corporate entities, governments and the media, art is an alternative means to present the way the world can be seen and understood. It is a means to think otherwise. This, in itself, is political.

I seek to find ways to provide benefit to others. This act is my form of resistance. I hope to offer some benefit to the world by creating circumstances of delight, intrigue and joy. I seek to honor all things living in the face of devastation and turmoil. And I present my action and energy as an offering to make amends for the destruction I am responsible for.

I often think about how we as humans will eventually colonize most if not all areas of wilderness, sites of diverse and complex ecosystems on Earth. I wonder what

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<sup>5</sup> "Affirmation is a viable premise on which to continue the romantic project of art as that which allows us to image otherwise..." -Drucker writes in her essay on Affectivity and Entropy.

will happen if this natural world comes to be replaced by all of the stuff that humans create. I suggest that that my work is a proposal, perhaps a sketched framework for what we might do with all of this stuff. Though never as it was, perhaps we rebuild the jungle, the creek and caves using that which is around us. *CliffDwellers* becomes the new swallow's nest and marsh; the craggy hill our grandparents climbed as children becomes mounds of undulating fabric.

Humans who live in urban areas often are desensitized to the noise (in every sense of the word) of the world they inhabit. However research shows that people gain physiological benefits from exposure to natural elements, like trees, sky and mountains. (Citation) One way I hope to offer benefit, if not to humans alone, is to offer exposure to events that mimic wildness and wilderness. My installations could never be the original rock, leaf, fur or feather, but my work can be of its qualities, essence, and wildness, and hopefully too might reflect an analogous satisfaction in the mind of the viewer.

This joy I hope to evoke in the viewers and seek for myself is not shallow. It travels from the cracks of sorrow, concern and difficulty, seeking relief. As an artist, (if that can be separated from being human) I choose to create experiences that are playful, exciting, and joyous as a reflection of the position I continually try to take in the world. The topics I am investigating in my work are often difficult ones, and bring up questions about the future of our species and our subsequent impact on other species and the diverse ecosystems that support them. I could easily get caught up in the pessimistic and perhaps nihilistic prophecy of environmental Armageddon. However I am more interested in the slippery, complex spaces between humans and the natural world, wildness and domestication, and the need for psychic freedom and stability. My hope is

that through joy and the cultivation and preservation of wildness (and wilderness) we as a species find pleasure, enthusiasm and balance in our lives.

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APPENDIX

SUPPORTING IMAGES



Figure 1. *CliffDwellers*, Installation shot, Mixed Media, Variable Dimensions



Figure 2 *CliffDwellers*, Installation shot, Mixed Media, Variable Dimensions





Figure 3 *CliffDwellers*, Installation shot, Mixed Media, Variable Dimensions



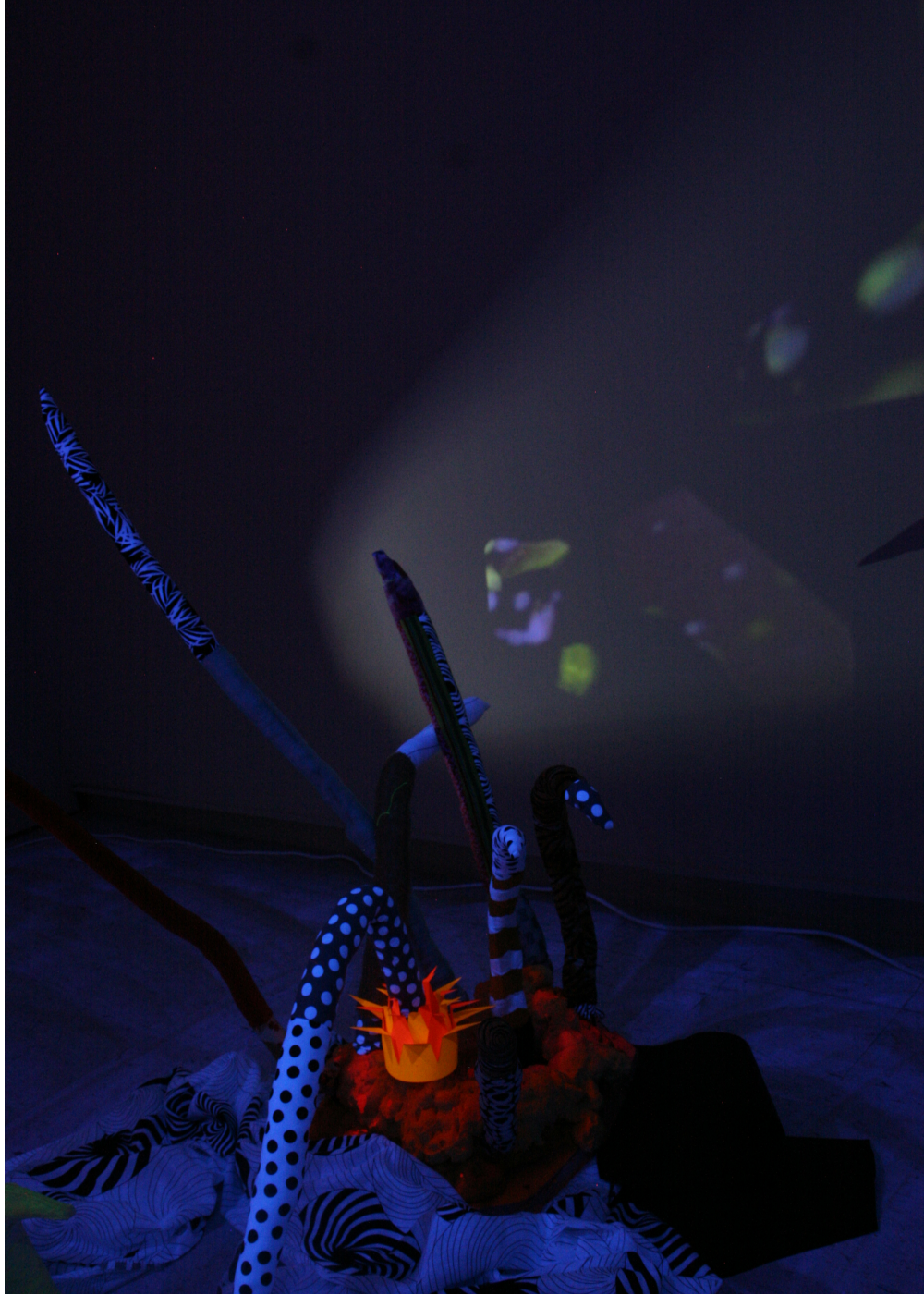


Figure 4 *CliffDwellers*, Installation shot, Mixed Media, Variable Dimensions